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## **Young people's perceptions of the 'Love Hurts' programme: Is theatre an effective means of addressing teenage relationship abuse?**

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Domestic abuse prevention education programmes have been found to be effective in bringing about attitudinal and behavioural change. However, there is limited research on theatre-based interventions developed in the United Kingdom. This study aimed to assess pupils' responses to a theatre production called 'Love Hurts'. A mixed methods approach, which incorporated an online survey and focus groups, was used to understand the pupils' perceptions of the play. The survey was completed by 294 pupils aged 11-19 years in five schools. Four focus groups were conducted in two of the schools involved. The pupils were generally very positive about the play, girls more so than boys. One of the strengths was that the young people reported being able to relate to the situations, and they found the use of theatre very engaging. They seemed to respond well to the use of a positive male role in the play, but reported that more could be done to highlight that women can be abusive too. Another theme was around the issue of trust, with some young people reporting feeling cautious about entering relationships following the play. The findings suggest that the young people responded well to the messages conveyed and felt that theatre was an effective means of addressing the issue. However, care is needed as to how to address the issues of gender and trust.

**Keywords:** domestic abuse; prevention; education; theatre; drama

### **Introduction**

Domestic abuse (DA) in the United Kingdom (UK) is defined as "any incident or pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality" (Home Office, 2013). In 2013, The British Home Office lowered the age at which DA can affect young people from 18 to 16 years old. This highlights that DA is an issue that affects teenagers; indeed, prevalence rates of teenage relationship abuse provide support for lowering the age even further.

In the UK, high rates of DA in teenage relationships have been reported. One of the first studies of its kind involved a survey of 1,353 young people aged 13-17 years. Out of the 88% that reported having at least one relationship experience, 59% of girls and 50% of boys had experienced emotional abuse, 22% experienced moderate physical violence, and 8% encountered severe physical violence (Barter *et al.*, 2009). A more recent study by Fox *et al.* (2014a) used a self-report survey with 1,143 young people aged 13-14 years. Out of the 83% that reported they had been in a dating relationship, 44% of males and 46% of females reported having been victimised. Emotional abuse and controlling behaviours were reported by 38% of the sample, and 17% had experienced physical abuse.

A limited number of Healthy Relationships Education (HRE) programmes are currently available in the UK and vary in their approach to delivery; some have drama performances, whereas others have different class-based activities exploring the issues at hand. The delivery of HRE is inconsistent due to the lack of direction from government to make time to fit this type of education into the curriculum. However, there has been a recent announcement from the UK government which means that HRE will be compulsory from September 2020 (Long, 2017). Thus, research is now even more important to evaluate HRE

programmes and consult with different stakeholders to understand what will make the delivery of HRE the most effective.

A substantial body of research exists which look at outcomes and whether HRE is effective at changing attitudes and behaviour. For example, Foshee *et al.* (1998) conducted a robust evaluation of a programme called ‘Safe Dates’ in the US. The results showed the programme was effective at changing behaviour as the students reported less abuse at post-test compared to the control condition. However, Hamby *et al.* (2012) found evidence to suggest that in order for a programme to be effective it needs to be developed through close consultation with young people in the country it is going to be delivered. The researchers attempted to implement ‘Safe Dates’ in Switzerland but the findings revealed it was not effective because it was perceived as not applicable to the Swiss culture. Thus, future programmes need to be developed in consultation with the audience they were intended for.

A UK-based programme that has been found to be effective at changing young people’s attitudes to be less accepting of violence is called ‘Relationships without Fear’ (RwF). An evaluation of RwF used a sample of 1,203 pupils aged 13-14 years old, with a control group, and a pre-, post-test and follow-up assessment to assess changes in attitudes (Fox *et al.*, 2016). The results showed the programme was successful; the teenagers’ attitudes were less accepting of violence compared to the control group, and this improvement was still seen three months later at follow-up.

To further explore the pupils’ perceptions of RwF focus groups were conducted with 32 children aged 10-11, and 13-14 years old (Fox *et al.*, 2014b). The findings indicated that the boys found the programme less engaging than the girls due to the use of talking activities. The pupils suggested that they wanted to learn through activities they could get more actively involved in. The use of learning activities (e.g. role-play) was used across all the years, however, the focus groups suggested some age differences. The younger children did not enjoy the use of role-play, whereas it appeared to be better received by the older children. This highlights that a programme’s activities need to be responsive to the age of the pupils. There were some issues with the content of the programme; some pupils reported feeling anxious about future relationships because they thought a partner could suddenly become abusive after being with them for a number of years. In addition, the programme focused on male perpetration of abuse which the boys found “sexist”. This indicates that further work is needed on how to portray the gendered nature of violence in HRE; if it is not portrayed in a more sensitive way, it could lead to some boys disengaging from the programme.

Moreover, the findings revealed that the educator needs to be alert to the fact that some pupils will have already experienced DA in the class, and understand the potential discomfort they might feel. With this in mind, Fox *et al.* (2014b) argued that teachers are best placed to deliver HRE due to the relationship they have with their class. Although, to be successful, appropriate training is needed so that teachers have the skills to manage group discussions ensuring they protect vulnerable pupils, but not disengaging the rest of the class in the process. The evaluation of RwF shows the benefits of using both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more comprehensive picture of the programme’s effectiveness, and it usefully highlighted some key issues to consider when delivering HRE.

Theatre in education is certainly not a new concept, falling under the umbrella of ‘applied theatre’. It is widely accepted that theatre has the capacity to connect audience members with the characters – both intellectually and emotionally. Through the process of identification, it can play a significant role in social, educational, and community development, as long as it reflects the audience’s specific realities (Ponzetti *et al.*, 2009). Toboada *et al.* (2016), who evaluated the use of theatre for HIV prevention with adolescents in a school setting, identified several benefits of this approach in addressing a range of public health concerns. Firstly, through its interactive nature it connects with audience members’

emotions, which can maximise attitudinal change; secondly, these interventions are typically culturally and developmentally appropriate, with actors who very closely resemble audience members; and thirdly, young people tend to find these approaches acceptable and memorable.

A recent review by Stanley *et al.* (2015) showed that only a limited number of healthy relationships programmes have used drama as a medium for learning. Moreover, the programmes that do use drama are seen as more authentic, which is highly valued by young people and this can increase their engagement (Stanley *et al.*, 2015). As pointed out by Fox *et al.* (2014b) some of the students enjoyed the role play element in the RwF programme. This suggests that further research is needed to see if drama is an effective medium to help young people learn about healthy relationships.

Hester and Westmarland (2005) reported on three HRE programmes in primary and secondary schools which all used drama. The programmes were evaluated using pre and post-test evaluations but also incorporated the children's views using focus groups, and interviews with the teachers. The results indicated that drama was received very positively by all students and the greatest changes in attitudes and understanding were seen when the programme was delivered through the whole school curriculum, rather than as a one-off session. This indicates that in order to increase the effectiveness of the programme's messages these issues need to be explored in other subjects such as English to maintain the positive impact. This is further supported by work conducted by Gadd *et al.* (2014) which showed that a one-off short intervention is not enough to bring about attitudinal change in young people.

Bell and Stanley (2006) evaluated the 'Healthy Relationships Programme', which was aimed at 12-13-year-olds. The programme involved watching a play and taking part in weekly workshops for five weeks. To assess the effectiveness of the programme a pre and post-test survey and focus groups were used. The survey findings revealed that the programme increased the pupils' awareness of DA and this was still apparent one year later at a follow-up. Through the use of focus groups it allowed the researchers to gain the pupils' insights into what they found effective. The pupils valued the use of drama in the programme and it was found to be a successful medium to help the young people learn about DA. However, there were clear gender differences; the boys were more positive about using drama compared to the girls. This highlights the need to use varied activities to suit boys and girls and to make sure that all children are engaged with the programme.

Moreover, the boys were extremely positive about the use of a male facilitator as it helped engage the boys with discussions and provided them with a positive male role model. However, the post-test survey revealed that the gendered nature of abuse was not fully understood by the children. This shows that the material needs to be carefully and sensitively delivered to make sure that the messages are properly understood. The programme was successful in helping young people realise that they could contact more appropriate forms of help such as family. However, this was not maintained at the one-year follow-up. Thus, more needs to be done to help encourage young people to seek help should DA become a feature of their lives.

In summary, research has suggested that HRE programmes are successful in educating young people about the issues related to DA, and can lead the young people to be less accepting of violence. The literature suggests that some young people value activities which use drama to learn about healthy relationships. The research has shown that boys are harder to engage thus, it is important to conduct further research to understand what are the most effective methods to engage boys, but not to the detriment of girls' learning (Stanley *et al.*, 2015). Research which has looked at the effectiveness of drama based HRE is severely lacking. It is important that programmes continue to be developed and evaluated in the UK,

and in consultation with the young people it is being designed for; otherwise, the programmes may not be as effective as they could be (Stanley *et al.*, 2015).

### **The present study**

In this study, pupils' perceptions of a theatre-based DA prevention education programme were explored. The research also considered gender differences in the pupils' perceptions of the programme; this was possible when analysing the responses to the closed survey questions. A mixed-methods approach was utilised to give a voice to respondents' perspectives and experiences in addition to gathering general survey data about responses to the programme. Thus, we deployed a 'pragmatist' research design, recognising that this would enable us to develop a better understanding than using either a quantitative or qualitative approach alone (Creswell Plano & Clark, 2007; Morgan, 2007). A convergent 'parallel' design was utilised, with the data from different methods analysed and findings presented separately, and then merged and integrated within the Discussion. This was a practical decision based on the timing of the play and the need for students to reflect on it (in the survey and focus groups) soon afterwards.

We used focus groups to explore participant perceptions in a more open way; they enabled the participants to provide new information, and elaborate and explain further. The focus groups followed soon after an online survey, which used a mixture of open and closed questions to gather the perspectives of a larger number of audience members. The closed questions enabled us to ask more specific questions of respondents, and test specific hypotheses regarding gender differences. These questions were complimented by a series of open questions, very similar to those used in the focus groups, that elicited qualitative data. These data were content analysed to identify issues reported by a larger number of participants. This enabled us to look at convergence and divergence in the findings from the survey and focus groups, thus increasing the reliability and validity of the findings. The focus groups were conducted after the survey and some children participated in both the survey and the focus groups. However, as noted above, the design was parallel not sequential, such that the findings from the survey did not directly inform the conduct of the focus groups.

'Love Hurts' was delivered by a theatre based organisation in the West Midlands that uses theatre as a way to challenge damaging behaviour and develop positive attitudes. The programme was a one-off intervention, delivered to students from school years 9-13 (ages 13-18 years). 'Love Hurts' consisted of watching a play which is based on the real-life experiences of young people who have lived through an abusive relationship. The play has three characters: the girlfriend, the boyfriend, and Jack - a mutual best friend to both the boyfriend and girlfriend. The play is set in a school environment and the characters are 14-15 years old. Accompanying each play were one-hour workshops delivered by specially trained facilitators from the company following the workshop (on the same day or next day); each child took part in one workshop. The workshops encouraged discussion, debate, and interaction with the issues at hand by using role-play activities which allowed the teachers and students to get involved. In some of the schools (including one of the schools involved in the focus groups) the Police were involved; they talked to the students about the legal issues.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were 294 students (149 males and 144 females gender is missing for 1 participant) from four secondary schools and one college in Stoke on Trent, who took part in the 'Love Hurts' programme during the school year 2015-2016. The participants were aged 11-19 years and the mean age of participants was 13.53 years ( $SD = 7.51$ ); the majority of the students were from years 9 and 10 ( $n = 281$ ) with the remainder from the sixth form

college, years 12 and 13 (n = 9); 4 were missing. Each institution where the play was shown (n = 9 secondary schools, 1 Pupil Referral Unit, two 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges) was sent an email which requested permission for their students to take part in an online survey. Informed consent was received from each child who took part in the online survey.

The second part of the study involved focus groups with the students that took part in the programme. Secondary schools were asked about access to participants for the focus groups at the same time they were emailed about the survey; two schools expressed an interest in taking part. Children were recruited via an expression of interest form which the school handed out on behalf of the researchers. A letter was then sent to parents to allow them to opt their child out from taking part. Four mixed-gender focus groups were conducted across two of the secondary schools involved. The groups consisted of 20 students in total: 8 males and 12 females, aged 13-14 years old.

Table 1 shows the composition of each focus group (ns 4-6). Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants and were used throughout the research process to maintain their anonymity.

[Insert Table.1]

### **Materials**

A 14-item survey was used to capture the students' perceptions of the content and delivery of the programme. The survey also gathered information regarding what the students liked the most and least about the programme and any suggestions for improvements. The survey consisted of both open and closed questions. The closed questions were answered using a 4-point scale, for example, "To what extent has the 'Love Hurts' play increased your knowledge of relationship abuse?" The response options were either, 1= not at all, 2=not very much, 3= a bit and 4=a lot. The options were changed accordingly to the question, for example, 1=not at all helpful, 2=slightly helpful, 3=very helpful and 4=extremely helpful. The higher the score, the more positive the participant was about the question. There were also questions which required either a yes or no answer, for example, "Would you recommend the 'Love Hurts' play to one of your friends to watch?". The open-ended questions allowed the young people to elaborate on the closed questions, for example, "In what way has the play increased your knowledge of relationship abuse?". These questions were more directive; other questions, e.g. when asked for their suggestions for improvement, were more open.

The materials for the focus groups included a semi-structured focus group schedule which was used to guide the discussion along with pictures of scenes from the play. Examples of the questions used include, "Has 'Love Hurts' made you aware of who to contact if you experienced relationship abuse?" and, "Have you got any ideas on how to improve 'Love Hurts'?".

### **Procedure**

The online survey was administered 3-4 months after the students viewed the play. The teachers were asked to read out standardised instructions to their class and to be available for the students to answer any questions they may have had while they completed the survey. The students could then access the survey via a link specific to each individual school. The students were asked to read through the information page and if they were happy to take part, they could then click next to continue to the survey. They were also told that they could stop taking part at any time during the survey. The survey was anonymous and the students were reassured that their responses would be confidential. After they had completed the survey they were debriefed and pointed to appropriate sources of support.

Focus groups were conducted four months after the students took part in the 'Love Hurts' and took place in the schools the students attended. At the beginning of each focus

group, the research team explained the research, reminded the students that they could leave the focus group at any time without giving a reason. The students were made aware that they would be asked to recall and discuss the 'Love Hurts' play, which might bring distress due to the sensitive nature of the topic. The students were also told they would not be asked about any personal experiences, and that they could refrain from answering questions if they did not want to contribute. The groups were facilitated using the focus group schedule, with prompts and probes used as appropriate. The focus groups lasted around 60 minutes each, and once the focus group had finished the students were thanked and debriefed. The students were made aware of different sources of support if the focus group had raised any issues for them. The group discussions were recorded and transcribed.

## **Data analysis**

Data analysis for the survey data involved Chi-Square analyses, to explore gender differences for the question that required a yes/no response, and for the scale questions (from 1-4) gender differences were examined using a Mann-Whitney U test. For each question a high score indicates a greater endorsement of that question. For example, "To what extent has the 'Love Hurts' programme increased your knowledge of relationship abuse?", a high score indicates that the students were more likely to say that the programme had increased their knowledge.

Content analysis was used for the open-ended questions. The responses were coded with one or two codes per response using a framework developed by the first researcher in consultation with the second researcher. The inter-coder reliability scores for the coding of the open-ended comments ranged from 82-95%. Frequency and percentages were then calculated based on the total number of 'units of meaning' for each question (max. of 2 for each question for each participant). Due to the nature of the data (e.g. open questioning and the codes not mutually exclusive) as well as the small number of responses for the codes identified, it was not appropriate to test for gender differences. For each question, only the top 3 or 4 categories are reported given the large number of categories generated (and only those with 5% or more responses).

Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the focus group data. This analysis was used as it can identify, analyse, and report themes across the focus groups. This analytical strategy also takes into account the qualitative richness of the data and can easily be used in a mixed methods design. The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) which firstly involved reading each transcript to become familiar with the data set, and initial codes were made. These codes were then re-read and refined further so that they captured that unit of meaning. The codes from the data set were then organised to see if any of the codes were related to each other and to see if there were potential themes emerging. This process was conducted independently by the two researchers before coming together to discuss the initial themes emerging. This process identified a number of themes, and these themes were then reviewed by re-reading the data extracts relating to that individual theme, and the whole data set. This meant that the themes attempted to capture the true representation of the data. The researchers reviewed the codes and themes, and this subsequently meant that some of the themes overlapped with other themes and so were merged. Whereas, other themes were slightly modified to capture the data extracts better.

## **Results**

### **Survey**

**Gender differences in the perceptions of the programme.** The results showed that females were overall more positive about the programme. 93% of females (133/143) would recommend 'Love Hurts' to a friend, whereas only 85% of males (117/137) would

recommend it. A Chi-Square analysis showed that females were significantly more likely to recommend 'Love Hurts' compared to males,  $\chi^2(1, N = 280) = 4.23, p < .05$ .

A Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare males and females' perceptions of the programme. The results indicated that females were more likely to say that the play had increased their knowledge, increased their likelihood to seek help, was a useful way to learn about relationship abuse, and were more likely to say that the play was true to real life (see Table 2).

[Insert Table.2]

**Perceptions of how the programme increased the students' knowledge.** When asked about how the play had increased this knowledge, the most frequent response was how it had increased their understanding of the different types of DA with 37% of responses reporting this (104/282). The second most popular code was help seeking, with 11% of responses reporting that they now had a greater understanding of different sources of support (31/282). However, 9% of responses indicated that the programme had now made them feel more wary about future relationships because they felt that anyone has the potential to be abusive (24/282).

**Perceptions of how the programme was a useful way to learn about relationship abuse.** The students reported that the play had enabled them to have a greater understanding of DA in general, with 34% of responses reporting this (101/298). The second most common response, with 14% of responses, was that the programme increased their understanding of different sources of help (41/298). 13% of responses reported that the play was useful as it displayed a realistic example of DA, which the students could relate to (40/298). 11% of responses reported that using drama was a useful way to learn about DA (34/298), some expanded that this is because it allowed the students to learn in a visual and engaging way.

**What the students liked the most about the programme.** The students reported that they liked the acting the most about the programme (15%; 34/232). Within this code there were examples of statements indicating that the actors helped some of the students understand DA through the emotions the different characters displayed in the play. The students were positive about how the play portrayed a realistic example of DA, with 12% of the responses indicating this (28/232). Some of the students expanded on their response indicating that the realism helped engage them with the topic. Similar to the acting being mentioned by 15%, the drama in general was reported by 11% (26/232). In addition, 6% of the responses reported that they liked the male friend in the play (13/232).

**What the students disliked about the programme.** The majority of the students were positive about the play, and this was suggested by 33% of the responses indicating that there was nothing they disliked (57/175). However, 22% of responses reported that they disliked the scenes which portrayed physical violence and rape (38/175). Responses indicated that for some, this was because the scenes made them feel very uncomfortable and anxious.

**The students' suggestions for improvements.** Again, the students were generally positive about the play as 25% of the responses indicated not being able to think of how to improve the play (50/201). Next, 16% wanted to see specific changes to the storyline (33/201), and 10% wanted more actors (20/201). Finally, 6% of the responses talked about wanting a longer intervention rather than the information being delivered in a one-off session (12/201).



In summary, the survey findings show that the students were generally positive about the programme, especially girls. To further explore the students' perceptions of the programme focus groups were conducted with a smaller number of students, as outlined below.

### **Focus groups**

The students were generally very positive about the play because it addressed an important issue which the students felt is often neglected within schools due to its sensitive nature. The students talked about how the project was successful in raising their awareness of DA which meant the students felt confident in understanding and recognising the different signs of abuse. The project also helped the students understand the extent of DA and the fact that it can happen to anyone.

Furthermore, the students were positive about the project increasing their confidence to seek help for themselves, or how to help a friend who was in an abusive relationship. The project helped the students understand that there are many different sources of help that they could turn to if they were in an abusive relationship.

The key themes: 'Learning through a different perspective', 'It was a teenage sort of thing', 'Ideas on what a relationship is', 'The role of the educator', and 'Not all guys are like that' are discussed below. These key themes emerged during the analysis, not only because they were underpinned by numerous supporting quotes, but also because they were relevant to the research aims. All of the themes reported below represent responses from males and females, except for the theme 'Ideas on what a healthy relationship is' which seemed to split the male and female participants.

**Learning through a different perspective.** There was a great deal of discussion about the programme being 'engaging', and there were several different engaging elements that the students talked about. The young people were very positive about the use of drama which allowed them to understand how DA is experienced by each character in the play, *"It made us look at different perspectives as well, not only being a witness but also being a friend who is involved with it all, and being someone who it has happened to"* (Amy, FG1).

By using drama it allowed the emotions that are experienced in relationship abuse to be portrayed in each character, which gave the students a true-to-life example of relationship abuse, and this seemed to be effective in increasing the students' understanding.

*When you talk about World War 1, like, you think it was bad but it was not that bad, but when I went to Belgium I actually saw the effects of it. It's like looking at it from a different perspective and seeing how bad it was.* (Boris, FG3)

Due to the interactive nature of the play and the use of role-play activities in the workshop the students were able to be involved with their learning and learn through a different perspective; this seemed to make the play effective in engaging the young people compared to class discussions which can make the students disengage from the messages being taught, *"When we were watching the play it was interesting and it got us involved. If we are just sitting in a lesson and they start speaking you just do not listen"* (Adam, FG3).

Previous approaches to delivering information to students on serious topics have been delivered in a class lesson where the teacher delivers the information in a "lecture" style. This has the potential to decrease the effectiveness of the message, whereas the play seems to engage the students in a very different way that appeared to get the message across, without being told explicitly.

*It's more of a casual approach to something that is a very serious matter, whereas when you have somebody standing at the front and they are just spouting out information about relationships and abuse it feels like you're being lectured. (Dani, FG4)*

**It was a teenage sort of thing.** The students were positive about the play being designed for their age group, which appeared to make the play effective in engaging the students with the messages being delivered. The play was made relatable to the students by using characters which were the same age, and situations which the teenagers would typically come across in their daily lives, *"In the background you could hear school bells and you could see text messages on the phone to her friends and we can sort of relate to it 'cause we are in the same position"* (Ella, FG2). This allowed the students to be in the shoes of the characters as they could understand the situations that the play was displaying, which made them feel that this could potentially happen to them.

*They do it well because it was aimed at us it was sort of we could be in their shoes 'cause it was a teenage sort of thing, and it was something where it wasn't too hard to imagine yourself in that sort of situation. I could relate to it pretty well it is a thing that could actually happen. (Guan, FG3)*

There was also a lot of talk about the play being realistic in terms of severity. There was a perception that the play was pitched just right because it was not too graphic, but at the same time not too subtle, and so it was something that the audience felt they could potentially experience. Previously programmes which the students have taken part in have shown the extremes of relationship abuse and this seemed to make the message less effective as the students thought that it was so extreme it would not happen to them, *"I liked that it wasn't over the top and it didn't exaggerate it, would just be how it would be in normal life"* (Adondé, FG3). This students went further by saying that it got the message across without making the students scared of future relationships, *"It wasn't too graphic either it was something for our age where we could understand it but it wasn't too in depth where we would get scared of doing anything"* (Adondé, FG3).

**Ideas on what a healthy relationship is.** In contrast, some of the young people (mainly females) did feel scared about future relationships because they felt that they had no control over what kind of relationships they will experience, *"Scary you don't know what you are walking into"* (Ella, FG1). Thus, more needs to be done to make sure that young people feel that not all relationships are bad. The play also left some of the females feeling anxious whether they could trust future partners who they were in a long-term relationship with, *"Even if you have been with someone for ten years people they can change and can turn into a bad person, so you can't trust someone fully"* (Emma, FG3).

Whereas, for the males, they felt that the play had not changed their opinion that all relationships are bad, but given them the skills to recognise a healthy and a unhealthy relationship which left the students a sense of control over their future relationships, *"Don't jump into stuff too soon make sure you know what you're getting into, so if you have just met someone you know who they are and they are not going to do anything bad"* (Boris, FG3).

*It's good you now know but it also shouldn't affect your ideas on what a relationship is because you just have to stand up for yourself. So instead of*

*being scared about going into a relationship, you can just stand up for yourself when it comes to it. (Jake, FG4)*

This meant that the males, more so than females, felt positive about future relationships and that their partner would not suddenly turn abusive, *“If you know someone for long enough you will end up knowing pretty much everything about them. Yeah, they can act sometimes in a way that completely shocks you but it doesn’t mean you can’t trust them”* (Boris, FG3). The young people wanted to see the play carry on and the victim to meet someone else and experience a more positive relationship. The students felt that this would offset any negative feelings they had towards future relationships, and this seemed to be an important factor to help the young people believe that things do get better and not all relationships are bad.

*It would be nice to see the play go on further to see if her life did get happier maybe she found somebody else, something to show her life got more positive when he was gone. To show people it does get better. (Dani, FG4)*

**The role of the educator.** The students had mixed feelings regarding teacher involvement in their HRE. Some students felt that it was key that their teachers are involved because it would send a message to the class that relationship abuse is an important issue that everyone should be actively addressing, *“The teachers are here to teach us about life situations and this is the perfect example so they need to be the ones getting us involved and asking questions”* (Emma, FG3).

*The teachers could get more involved ‘cause, one, it would make us feel like they’re interested in it as well as because they are the ones that had actually put it on, so it would actually make us think they wanted to be involved instead of sitting there. (Adondé, FG3)*

The students also felt that if their teachers were involved it would also encourage their class to answer questions because they would feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics with someone that they know, *“You feel more encouraged to answer the question because you are not as shy with [teacher]”* (Alex, FG4). They felt that this would result in their class being more engaged, which would have a positive impact on their learning. However, some students felt uncomfortable having their teachers involved, *“I found it awkward [teacher] was there”* (Kim, FG2), giving a number of different reasons for this. One of the reasons was the issue of confidentiality, *“I think you speak to people you don’t know better. Yeah, say the teacher relates to it in class to what you said it’s better without them”* (Adam, FG4). The students also felt that the teachers would not take their opinion seriously, *“The teachers think she has that personality so obviously she would say that and not take it as seriously, but the facilitators don’t know you so they will take everything seriously”* (Zederia, FG4). The students also spoke about how they do not listen to information from the teachers because it does not seem relevant to them.

*You feel like when a teacher is talking about it you understand what they are saying, not that you chose to ignore it but you just choose not to be as careful as they have told you, but when it’s someone who is our own age it makes it feel like oh this has happened. (Adondé, FG3)*

The students were positive about the involvement of the Police in the project as they helped the students get a better understanding of the issue by telling the young people real accounts of how they have dealt with DA, *"I liked when the Police came in as they know more things and then they were talking about different events which have happened, and yeah the consequences of them"* (Jake, FG4). The involvement of the Police also helped break the stigma the students had in relation to talking to the Police if they needed help, *"They told us that we could go to them with anything at any point because they are in school all the time"* (Kim, FG2).

**Not all guys are like that.** There was a lot of talk about how relationship abuse can happen to males, and there is still a bias towards the lack of attention for male victims of abuse. The young people felt very negative towards the lack of media coverage surrounding abuse towards males; when this has been shown it seems to highlight the stigma that males should be strong even if they are in an abusive relationship.

*I feel that the media never shows abuse towards males as it always seems to be shunned upon. I watched a programme where a man was saying his wife abuses him and the audience said it was pathetic, and that he should stand up for himself* (Boris, FG3).

The young people spoke expressed the view that males are just as vulnerable as females and there should not be any differences in a male or female perpetrator as they can both do as much damage as each other.

*I don't think women should be treated differently, there should be consequences because they have done a crime even if sounds stupid because men are supposed to be tougher. The fact is a woman can do just as much damage as a man can* (Alex, FG3).

To break down the stereotypes towards male victims of abuse the young people were extremely passionate about having more information regarding this issue. The students felt that there is a severe shortage of information surrounding male victimisation, *"We are always seeing how a girl is being treated in a relationship but we never see how a boy is being treated"* (Zederia, FG4). During the programme, the young people had the chance to explore abuse towards males in their workshop, and they were extremely positive about this part of the programme.

*It's always been the girls that are the victims, so to see it, on the other hand, we haven't really ever seen it where the boy has been affected more than the girl, so it makes you look at it from that perspective because it does happen to boys.* (Laura, FG1)

The play included a male character, who was the best friend of the victim, and the students were extremely positive about this aspect of the play. The students felt that the character allowed them to see that not all males are 'bad'. The best friend character helped offset some of the negative feelings the young people had regarding gender, *"I'm actually glad it was a boy because some girls would overreact and be like you can't trust boys can you, it shows you not all guys are bad"* (Boris, FG3).

## **Discussion**

The students' responses from the survey and focus groups indicate that they appeared to respond well to the messages in the 'Love Hurts' play. The responses to the closed questions on the survey indicated that the majority of students were very positive about the programme, especially girls. From the survey and focus groups, it appears that the students felt that the play had increased their understanding of the nature of DA (particularly the forms it takes) and given them the skills and confidence to understand what makes a healthy and unhealthy relationship. They also felt that it had also given them information on how to seek help. However, it is unknown whether these positive effects would be maintained; previous research has shown that help-seeking is not always maintained at follow-up, thus, more may need to be done in order to maintain help-seeking behaviours (Fox *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, there were gender differences in the survey responses, which showed that males still need more encouragement to seek help. This supports a wealth of research in the field of mental health, which has shown that young males are more reluctant to seek help compared to females (Biddle *et al.*, 2004).

The survey and focus group findings suggest that the use of theatre helped engage the students with the key messages in the play, to enable them to gain a deeper understanding of DA. Previous research has also shown that drama and interactive elements are well received by young people, and are especially helpful for engaging boys who respond more positively to kinaesthetic learning approaches (Bell & Stanley, 2006). Research has also shown that young people prefer interactive activities when learning about relationship abuse (Fox *et al.*, 2014b). Thus, interactive elements such as role-play and drama should be encouraged in future programmes.

Students were positive about the sense of realism the play achieved as the students also felt like they could imagine themselves in the 'shoes' of the characters. Due to the age of the characters being similar to the audience, it made the play seem realistic. This was also influenced by the use of real spoken accounts of teenagers' own experiences of relationship abuse during the play. This made the messages feel more authentic as it happened to someone their own age, and so it could potentially happen to them. Through the use of drama the students also could visually see and understand what it is like to be a victim, a witness and a friend to a victim. This is something that may be hard to convey in other mediums of learning. This finding came from the survey and focus groups, thus, increasing the credibility of the findings. It is also consistent with the views of others, such as Toboada *et al.* (2016), who stated that drama can engage with audience members' emotions, and the realism displayed enables the messages to have a greater impact.

The focus group discussions revealed that some of the young people would not want their teachers present. Yet other students wanted their teachers to be more involved because they felt it would increase student participation, thus meaning the session would be more interactive, and, in turn, help their own learning. Moreover, some young people felt that teachers could help them feel more comfortable, which is essential for talking about sensitive topics. Previous literature has also suggested that teachers are best placed for delivering relationship education because they understand their students better than those from an external organisation. However, teachers need training and support from external organisations (Fox *et al.*, 2014b). This finding did not emerge from the online survey, but this may be because there was not a specific question about the role of the teacher. Given that the role of the educator has been shown to be play a key role in the success of a programme (CRG Research, 2009), future research should elicit students' perceptions of this more controversial issue to gain a better understanding of what some of the challenges are.

The survey findings showed that some young people disliked specific scenes in the play that made them feel uncomfortable and anxious. However, the focus group discussions revealed that the young people thought the play was pitched correctly in terms of severity.

However, this may reflect the fact that those students with more positive perceptions of the play would have volunteered for the focus groups. Previous literature has also shown that fear is linked to a greater level of engagement when using a realistic method to teach children about fire safety (Smith and Ericson, 2009). Thus, it is key not to scare young people about relationship abuse, but a certain level of realism is needed for young people to understand the severity of relationship abuse. Nevertheless, the survey findings suggest that some children could find the content too difficult to handle, and so support will be needed for some students during and after the play.

In the survey and within the focus groups, some of the young people expressed the view that they could not trust a partner in a long-term relationship because they could suddenly become abusive, thus, some of the young people felt anxious and scared about future relationships, mainly the female participants. This finding was also shown in the research by Fox *et al.* (2014b). Thus, more needs to be done in order to show that not all relationships are 'bad'. Yet, in the focus groups, other young people, mainly the boys, felt that the play had made them more cautious about future relationships in a good way, with the recognition that trust develops over time. The findings together suggest that young people need to be exposed to examples of both healthy and unhealthy relationships, and that the issue of trust needs to be addressed very carefully; care is needed to make the young people understand that not all relationships are 'bad'. In the current research, the students suggested showing the victim within a more positive relationship after the abusive one. This would allow the young people to see a more positive relationship and help them to see that things do get better. These findings also highlight the need for a greater emphasis on gender differences within this type of research.

In terms of the programme being pitched so that it does not foster disengagement in the young people, the play was centred around the young people being more likely to have a friend who is in an abusive relationship rather than themselves. The focus groups revealed that the young people thought it was crucial for them to know what to look out for, and how to help a friend. This approach to learning about relationship abuse has been encouraged by Stanley *et al.* (2015), who emphasised using a 'bystander approach'. This can be an effective way to challenge the peer group and bring about social change, and by using this approach it allows everyone to be framed as agents of change rather than blaming males (Fenton & Mott, 2017).

This is an important approach for engaging males as they can disengage with programmes when they are viewed as blaming males. Indeed, this was highlighted in the current research as the young people in the focus groups expressed the view that they wanted more to be done to show that women can be abusive too. While it is important to teach children about the gendered nature of violence, this does not always map onto teenagers' experiences where there appears to be greater gender symmetry (Fox *et al.*, 2014a), and it can mean that children, especially boys disengage from the programme. Thus, this issue needs to be handled carefully. One way this could be achieved is by having a positive male role model in the play to show that not all men are bad; as shown in the focus group findings, this may have offset any negative feelings regarding gender from the portrayal of male on female violence. Stanley *et al.* (2015) highlighted the importance of using non-blaming approaches and engaging boys through using different learning styles, to engage boys with the programme messages.

However, it is important to acknowledge that our conclusions are based on young people's *perceptions*, and even with an anonymous survey, the young people might have told us what they thought they wanted us to hear. This study also focused on perceptions of one programme, when there are many other ways of teaching young people about healthy relationships. Thus, the findings should be generalised to other programmes with caution.

Future studies could also move beyond an examination of perceptions to assess knowledge more directly, and how well the messages are absorbed and retained. Such an approach would necessitate use of an outcome evaluation design, which also allows for the assessment of change in attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Foshee *et al.*, 2004)

However, by using a mixed methods design and incorporating open-ended questions in the survey, as well as focus groups, it allowed us to gain in-depth knowledge of the young peoples' perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and suggestions for improvement. This is important in light of findings from the implementation of Safe Dates in Switzerland (Hamby *et al.*, 2012). Any programme needs to be acceptable to the audience it was intended for. The reliability and credibility of the findings were increased through the use of triangulation of different sources of evidence. This is because the different evaluation methods used in the study provided complementary information that made up for the shortcomings of either one of the evaluation methods. Indeed, we did see a degree of convergence in the findings.

Unfortunately, the nature of the research did not allow us to fully examine gender differences beyond conducting fairly simple comparisons between boys and girls in their ratings of the play. Future research could build on our findings to more directly assess gender differences within a survey, complemented by focus groups that have the primary purpose of assessing gendered perceptions (e.g. through the use of single and mixed-gender focus groups) It is important to conduct further research examining gender differences to explore how best to engage girls and boys in HRE.

Finally, more needs to be done to ensure that a play like 'Love Hurts' is not a one-off stand-alone intervention. Previous research has shown that one-off programmes have limited success in bringing about change (Gadd *et al.*, 2014). Thus, more needs to be done to make time and space within the curriculum, and to embed HRE throughout the school curriculum so that the messages are reinforced. This is highlighted by the recent announcement that sex and relationship education is going to be mandatory in all schools in England (Long, 2017). Further research is needed to find out the most effective means of delivering HRE *throughout* the school curriculum.

In conclusion, the young people responded positively to the play and it appears to have raised their awareness of DA in many different ways. The research suggested that young people find interactive methods such as theatre and role-play the most engaging mediums for learning about healthy relationships. Thus, these techniques should be encouraged in future programmes where possible. Further research is needed to explore the role of the teacher, and gender differences in perceptions and experiences of HRE.

## Data availability

Research data are not publicly available.

## Ethical guidelines

The ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society were followed, and ethical approval was granted from the Keele University's School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

## Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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